

Sister sketch artists work side by side producing courtroom renderings

By VALERIE A. RUSSO

Most artists don't have their work shown on the 6 o'clock news. But the artwork of Connie Flavell Pratt of Norwell and Jane Flavell Collins of Duxbury is featured frequently.

The sisters are both courtroom artists for major television networks in Boston.

"We're usually called for an important or sensational case," said Pratt. "Cameras are not allowed in federal court."

Over the past 25 years, the Flavell sisters have had front-row seats for some of the biggest trials in New England — John Salvi, Pamela Smart, Stephen "The Rifleman" Flemmi, "shoe bomber" Richard Reid and most recently, Gary Sampson.

The networks do not purchase the actual courtroom drawings, but rather, the right to photograph them for their news broadcasts. Pratt works exclusively for Channel 5; Collins works for Channel 4, Channel 7 and Fox Channel 25. When there's a trial of worldwide interest, other networks and newspapers also purchase the publication rights.

"The shoe bomber was our biggest case in terms of exposure," said Collins. "It was on the national networks and television and newspapers all over the world. One of my sketches even made front page of the New York Daily News."

Collins, who is 11 years younger than Pratt, got her first assignment as a courtroom artist in 1976. She had sent samples of her work to the news director of a Boston TV station and was hired as a substitute. Between 1977 and 1981, she won three New England Emmys for her courtroom sketches.

Pratt's first assignment was several years later, when she was called to fill in for her sister. In the 1970s and '80s they were in court almost every day. Nowadays, they're called less often because cameras are allowed in all Massachusetts state courtrooms. Between court assignments, they do portrait commissions in their home studios.

The sisters, both graduates of the Massachusetts College of Art, have succeeded as courtroom artists because they can produce a likeness quickly and accurately under conditions that are not always ideal.

"The idea is to go to court on a day and have it ready for viewing that night,"



PETER RICCIARDI JR. photo

Connie Flavell Pratt of Norwell works on a portrait as she chats with her sister, Jane Flavell Collins of Duxbury. The two have worked side by side since the 1970s, sketching courtroom proceedings for Boston TV stations.

Pratt explained. "When there's an arraignment or a hearing, we might only see the person for 10 minutes. Then we do our best to remember everything about the person, including what he's wearing. If a photo was taken outside the courtroom the day before, we can use that as a reference."

During the pre-arraignment hearing for the shoe bomber case, they saw Reid for less than five minutes. Yet they were able to produce an accurate likeness.

"He was easy to do, because his hair was very wild and he was wearing a bright orange jumpsuit," said Collins. "His features were large, he was 6-feet-7-inches tall and very stooped for such a young man."

Pratt added, "The courtroom artist exaggerates more than the portrait artist. A strong, quick portrait is a kind of caricature."

Selecting a subject

They have learned from experience what to draw. They always sketch a courtroom scene with the judge and the flag, as well as the defendant, his lawyer and the important witnesses. They draw the jury in such a way that individual jurors cannot be identified.

They also take direction from their station's news reporter.

"There might be something going on in the trial that I don't know about," said Pratt. "The reporter might say, 'Be sure to do that person who's sitting there. She's a relative and she's going to make trouble.'" Sometimes, however, the artists are too kind-hearted to do exactly as the reporter says.

"In the Gary Sampson trial, the reporter wanted me to draw the grieving relatives," (during some of the more graphic testimony of the case) Pratt said. "I turned around and said, 'I don't believe I can do that.' I drew them later, when they testified."

The sisters draw with charcoal, erase with chamois and add color by using tiny pieces of pastel, an oily, chalk-like medium.

Pratt works on 19-by-25-inch sheets of medium-brown paper; Collins uses

Sketch artists share family tree, notable careers in the courtroom

■ COURTROOM

Continued from Page 9

18-by-24-inch gray paper. They carry their pastels and charcoal in Tupperware containers with compartments for the different colors.

Before they begin to draw, they compose the picture in their minds.

"You can't put everybody in," Collins explained. "You don't have room or time. You might leave out the clerk or the court stenographer."

Pratt agreed: "You have to push people closer together and shrink the distance. If you did it realistically, the lawyer sitting directly in front of you would have a huge head and the judge's head would be the size of a pin."



Terrorist would-be shoe bomber Richard Reid is captured in a fit of rage, above, in a courtroom sketch by artist Jane Flavell Collins of Duxbury. At left, Reid sits stoically in court in a sketch made earlier by Collins' sister, Connie Flavell Pratt of Norwell.

Vantage advantage

One of the most challenging aspects to a courtroom artist's job can be finding a good seat. The sisters each learned that lesson early on.

"I was late and I was with reporter Ron Gollobin," said Collins, who had been called in for the 1976 trial of Senator Joseph DiCarlo, who was facing corruption charges.

"I had to walk down this long corridor, past a bunch of reporters. I got to the end of it and I couldn't see who was on the stand. Ron said, 'Look, there's a better seat.' So I went over and sat down. A court officer came over and said, 'Madam, that's the defendant's chair.'

"I was so embarrassed," recalled Collins. "I thought, nothing could be any worse than that."

Pratt's first day wasn't much better. She was covering the divorce case of Senator Edward Brooke.

"I was exceedingly nervous," said Pratt. "I found what I thought was a real catbird seat and it was wonderful. Two good-looking ladies were sitting next to me and sketching as well. They were sisters from New York. Before I knew it, they had nudged me behind a pillar and I couldn't see. I never let it happen again."

Today, Pratt and Collins usually sit side-by-side in the front row. If there is only one seat with a good view, they take turns. For an arraignment or pre-trial hearing, the court officers seat them in the empty jury box.

After the television networks have photographed their work, they sometimes sell their sketches and portraits to judges, lawyers and the occasional defendant. Frank Angiullo, who was on trial for racketeering, purchased Pratt's portrait of his girlfriend, who had been sitting in the courtroom during the nine-month trial. Stephen "The Rifleman" Flemmi also admired Pratt's work.

"I can remember Stephen Flemmi walking by us, time after time," said Collins. "He stopped one day, looked over at Connie and said something like, 'Hey, nice job!'"

Pratt, a perfectionist, often concentrates so intensely on her courtroom portraits that she doesn't

pay attention to the testimony or think about the crimes her subjects are accused of committing.

"Connie makes all her people look so beautiful — even members of the Mafia," said Collins, gesturing toward Connie's sketch of Timothy J. Mello, who was arrested for racketeering.

"You put a bow tie on that man and he could teach at Harvard," said Collins. "She elevates people."

Multi-tasking

Collins, on the other hand, said she can generally sketch and listen at the same time.

"But when Judge William Young was sentencing the shoe bomber, I remember just sitting there and listening to him," she said. "The judge had been so nice the whole time. But at the very end, he said, 'See this flag, Mr. Reid? That's the flag of the United States of America. That flag will fly here long after you're forgotten.'"

"The shoe bomber got madder and madder. It was over, and he couldn't believe what had just been said to him. As he backed out of the courtroom, he began ranting and raving, 'Your flag will come down and so will your country — you will be judged by Allah.'"

"At that point, I began drawing him," Collins recalled.

But sometimes, Pratt, who is married with three grown sons, and Collins, who is the married mother of a grown daughter, are so overcome with emotion, they find it difficult to work. This happened at the sentencing of convicted killer Gary Sampson.

"We sketched Mrs. Rizzo (the mother of Jonathan Rizzo of Kingston, one of Sampson's victims) as she testified at the sentencing. That was very hard," recalled Collins.

"She was giving the reasons she thought (Sampson) should get the harshest sentence for murdering her son. We both cried when she was crying."

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